

CONFRONTING CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES 3

“IS THERE ANY WONDER...?”

“And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.” Luke 2: 6-7

Over the past 2 weeks we have launched this series dealing with different aspects of some of the current cultural conflicts alive in our world today. We have spent some time discussing the ongoing battles over celebrating Christmas, and removing Christ from Christmas. I have tried to not minimize the severity of this conflict by forcing us to look differently at how we are addressing it, but not sure I've succeeded. Boycotts and email signature ballots all probably have their place, but the way we live our lives has a far greater and longer lasting potential for impact than adding our name to a document who knows who reads! But the battle is real, and doesn't show signs of weakening, any time soon. That being the case, I want to address one more issue related to the whole Christmas controversy.

As troubled as I am about the abuse of the Christmas season by agnostic ACLUers and thinned skinned retailers and timid school administrators; I am even more troubled by the brash consumerism, bold-faced materialism, and blatant commercialism running rampant through our culture and even in many Christian lives! This more than anything else, is ruining the real meaning of Christmas, in my opinion. Thus the question...is there any wonder...left in Christmas?

Do any people wonder about God's choice for sending a savior? Do any wonder what Jesus' reception would be if he were 'born again' in our world the way he was 2000 years ago? Do any wonder about the implications of his birth, not just on the retail bottom line, not just on the presents under the tree, but His impact on our individual lives? I DO! I want to try and help us see that wonder is a good thing, a better gift than mindless trinkets.

People's response to Jesus this time of year; is based solely on what they expect to find in the manger. And begs the question; what do you expect to find? Brightly wrapped gifts of more stuff you don't need, or salvation from a most unlikely source; an infant who grew up to die for the world's sins, even mine, even yours!

Over the next few minutes I want to look at how different people responded to Jesus, based solely on what they expected to find in the manger. I wonder...what we expect to find.

1. MARY PONDERES AND WONDERS IN HER HEART

...but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. Luke 2: 19

Mary had the most to lose...and much to gain by birthing this 9-month miracle. She was young, afraid, uncertain, ashamed, amazed...obedient; and she gave birth to her Savior. She didn't know she was kissing the face of God, the great I Am, the Lord of the Universe. But she kissed her baby anyway, and wondered what all this could mean. We know she had some inkling this was no ordinary pregnancy, having never been with a man. She knew this child was going to be different; the angels, her aunt and uncle, and even Joseph assured her of such. And her response? She wondered, she pondered. She spent time thinking, praying, imagining, the best and the worst I suppose. Her heart was full of wonder, awe, more fear...and more obedience!

Many people have eliminated the wonder from our religion by requiring provable facts, and demonstrable results, and repeatable measurements, but God doesn't often offer that...instead he offers a helpless innocent infant, and leaves us to ponder...to wonder...what will become of this child...in my life; in my world?

Make room for wonder in your manger today!

2. THE ANGELS SANG PRAISES TO GOD

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven – praising God and saying...Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased. Luke 2: 13-14

These were the most unsurprised of all the respondents to this miraculous manger event. Remember, they were with Jesus long before His coming to earth, and received him back again following his death. They merely traveled along to make sure he had a safe journey and got a proper reception. Their response might be predicted, this was their job, their duty. They might be forgiven for a lack of enthusiasm with the weariness of daily singing and praising...but they too knew this day...this event...was something special, so the skies over Palestine rang out with song as these heavenly hosts expected the world to be awestruck with what they already knew was coming.

Many people think they already know what they'll find in the manger, and so just play along; assuming life will always be just as it's always been. It's not. In fact nothing has ever been the same since that manger visitation. Many miss the wonder, because they expect to find what they assume they know. They miss the mystery, because they think they have it all figured out. They miss the miracle, because they have explained away the divine, and stopped believing in myths, and forsaken the fantasy of childhood. And they miss out on discovering Jesus again, for the first time! Their lives might seem mundane, boring even. There is nothing new under the sun, what goes around comes around, everything's the same...or is it? I wonder?

3. THE SHEPHERDS SHOUT 'GOOD NEWS' TO EVERYONE

After seeing the baby, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherd's story were astonished. Luke 2: 17-18

The shepherds got caught up in the moment, got out of the doldrums of their despicable existence and radically and emotionally embraced what they found in the manger. From the manger doorway they began proclaiming what they had seen, what had happened to them.

These lowly shepherds, the hired men of the Palestine Culture were not the most respected, not the most believable, certainly not the most trusted; but their view of the manger made their voice an effective chorus for all who could not help but hear! Their unbridled enthusiasm far outweighed their lack of social graces, or intellectual competence. Their emotional response to what they had heard, and now, what they had seen; made them effective witnesses to all who heard them. I wonder about us...?

Many people expect to find something in the manger, but won't allow their emotions free reign to receive, rejoice and release the joy they find in Jesus. Oh, their hearts may well be embraced by the majesty of the manger miracle, but they have yet to let their faces...or their lives in on the secret! And so on they go, bearing the good news privately, secretly, safely locked in a vault of their own choosing, and all around them people are seeking for an answer to their own problems, and no one shares their answer. These shepherds were an exception. They immediately let their voices be heard, I wonder...if we might be as exceptional as a bunch of shepherders?

4. THE WISE MEN WORSHIP AND GIVE GIFTS

About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, 'where is the newborn king of the Jews?; We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.' Matthew 2: 1-2

It would be safest to say that 'wise men (and women) still worship Him.' But these men, by contrast, were different than the shepherds. They were some of the most intelligent of their day. They were the astrologers who spent their lives studying the stars, not looking for signs of life on other planets, but looking for signs and messages from The Life beyond the stars! These wise men began their journey at least a year before Jesus was born, modeling patience and persistence in our own search for the birthplace of the Savior. These wise men brought gifts, significant gifts to honor the one who came to earth riding on the beams of that bright star to that humble manger in Bethlehem.

Their long journey had to contain at least some wonder. No star had ever appeared like this one before; none have come again since. Long hours aback horses or camels or on foot would afford ample time for contemplation, and wonderment. These men might have been the most expectant, having begun their journey even before Mary began hers.

Many people expect to find a miracle in the manger; and most who complete the journey do find one; while some are sometimes disappointed. Maybe the journey is too long, the path to which we have been called too difficult, the marathon more than we bargained for, certainly more than we signed on for. But the faithful keep expecting, keep worshiping, keep coming...and keep giving; while the doubters and those who sought only an easy faith...often go away disappointed. Let us continue to seek, at the end of whatever our journey may entail; the Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

5. SIMEON AND ANNA BLESS THE FAMILY AND PREDICT TROUBLE

Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary, the baby's mother, 'This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, but he will be a joy to many others. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. Luke 2: 33-35

Simeon and Anna attend the temple for years, waiting for the arrival of their Savior so they could die in peace. Before they go, however, they make a troublesome prediction that has come home to roost, even in the midst of this Current Cultural Controversy about Christ and Christmas. It's all there. This child, this wonderful child will cause many in our world to fall, for he reminds us of our sinfulness, and our selfishness. He reminds us of our helplessness and our dependence, when independence is what we think we want, and even need. He reminds us that life is all about the choices we make, and every choice has a correspondent consequence. He is the stone that some builders reject, and the cornerstone of faith that others accept!

He is the dividing line in history, and in the human heart. Not to decide is to decide. To say yes to Jesus is to automatically say no to so many other things in this world.

Many people like Simeon and Anna wait through long years of suffering and hardship to meet their Savior, but in the end, they die in peace and spend eternity in contentment, because they never lost their ability to wait...and to wonder! Simeon and Anna made a choice to live until they met the one who could keep them from ever dying...then they died! On the natural level it doesn't make much sense, but I wonder if on another level it makes all the sense in the world?

6. HEROD KILLS ALL THE INFANT BOYS IN BETHLEHEM

Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them, 'Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too

...Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men's report of the star's first appearance. Matthew 2: 7-8 & 16

Herod was a lying snake, and represents all those who say one thing and intend another. He concocted this ruse to find out where Jesus was born under the promise of some false and inappropriate worship. The wise men...well, they saw through that. God does too.

Herod expected to find a rival, in the manger of Bethlehem, a political rival that is; and we all know Jesus never came to upset the political landscape of the world, but to redeem even that often 'godless institution' by redeeming and changing the lives of those who make up the government. The same is true today. We can rag and rail against our government for failing to maintain our Christian standard of living in our Christian nation; but that has never been Jesus' agenda. He never set out to accept the mantle that would have put him in some political office whereby he might exercise his authority to change laws or determine national destinies.

His purpose was, is and will ever be to effect said changes first in the hearts and minds of those willing folks who still seek wonder in the manger, and through them, effect change in our world!

Herod was intimidated by this infant because he knew the manger contained the antithesis of his wanton hedonism. And now we have come full circle. Our culture is full of Herodian Hedonism that runs amok this time of year! Our fear of Jesus is not so much what he requires of us, but of his wonderment at our wanton consumerism. Many people reject Jesus because they fear finding a rival that will force them to leave their selfish lives of extravagant indulgence, and embrace a selfless life of sacrifice and serving. That is the fate of those who choose to live without wonder in their lives. They are on their own, killing rival babies; and being killed by unfettered passions of personal pursuits, ignoring God, and refusing to wonder.

So what you looking for in the manger today? An affirmation of your overspending? Not gonna happen. A justification that everyone else is doing it? Not gonna cut it? A rationalization that spending money we don't have on more stuff we don't need, to impress people we don't know; is what is required in this day and age... ..is it any wonder we're having trouble keeping Christ in Christmas. Wonder...it's the only way! Ponder these things, and ...wonder...in your heart. Amen

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